

# Southend on Sea Borough Council Fostering Service

Inspection report for local authority fostering agency

---

<b>Unique reference number</b>	SC056084
<b>Inspection date</b>	22/01/2013
<b>Inspector</b>	Sharon Lewis / Jackie Graves
<b>Type of inspection</b>	Full

---

<b>Setting address</b>	The Fostering Team, Civic Centre, Victoria Avenue, Southend-on-Sea, SS2 6ER
<b>Telephone number</b>	01702 534406
<b>Email</b>	dianekeens@southend.gov.uk
<b>Registered person</b>	Southend-On-Sea Borough Council
<b>Registered manager</b>	Diane Keens
<b>Responsible individual</b>	Diane Keens
<b>Date of last inspection</b>	20/03/2008

---

© Crown copyright 2013

Website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)

This document may be reproduced in whole or in part for non-commercial educational purposes, provided that the information quoted is reproduced without adaptation and the source and date of publication are stated.

## Service information

### Brief description of the service

Southend Fostering Service is part of Southend-on-Sea Borough Council. The Fostering Team comprises of, a team manager, three senior social workers, one senior social worker with responsibility for the fostering project, seven supervising social workers, one placements officer, one marketing and recruitment officer and two administrators. They work together to undertake all fostering tasks such as recruitment, assessment, supervising carers, private fostering, delivering training, kinship care, all placement finding and financial management.

The service currently has 97 fostering households, who care for 145 children.

### The inspection judgements and what they mean

**Outstanding:** a service of exceptional quality that significantly exceeds minimum requirements

**Good:** a service of high quality that exceeds minimum requirements

**Adequate:** a service that only meets minimum requirements

**Inadequate:** a service that does not meet minimum requirements

## Overall effectiveness

The overall effectiveness is judged to be **good**.

Children receive a good service from an organisation which has strong leadership and is effectively managed. Foster carers, staff and panel members are well qualified, highly skilled, experienced and passionately committed to their role. Staff and foster carers enjoy good training opportunities and receive substantial support.

Children are placed without avoidable delay with foster carers who can meet their needs. Close partnership working ensures children are assisted to maximise their potential. The organisation creatively meets the diverse needs of children. This results in children making good progress in relation to their starting points. Children provide very positive feedback regarding their foster carers. They specifically highlight their appreciation of being made to feel part of a family. The organisation's 16 plus arrangements are strong, providing young people with a good transition into adulthood. Extensive consultation systems enable children to influence their care planning and influence the development of the services. Safeguarding is at the heart of the service ensuring all decision making promotes the best interests of children. Fostering panel arrangements are robust and the quality assurance aspects are very beneficial to the service.

Leaders and managers demonstrate a commitment to fostering and are taking effective steps to further improve the service. They have an accurate understanding of the strengths and areas for development. The service continues to evolve and has a very good capacity to further improve. This inspection recognises that the foster service is undergoing a period of change, with new management, systems and an office move. Shortfalls are minor and three recommendations are made to further improve the outcomes for children. Two are in relation to information sharing and the consistent implementation of policies and procedures. The service should ensure children are given introductory information regarding their foster carers. Foster carers should also have access to full information about the child, including risk assessments. Children would also appreciate support to develop a positive self-esteem in regards to being a child looked after.

## Areas for improvement

### Recommendations

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- give children information about the foster carer before arrival at the placement, and any information (including where appropriate, photographic information) they need or reasonably request about the placement (NMS 11.3)
- provide foster carers with full information about the child as set out in standard 3.9. Information should include risk assessments (NMS 11.2)
- support children to develop positive self-esteem and emotional resilience to confront prejudice. This relates specifically to the positive aspects of being a looked after child. (NMS 12.1 b)

### Outcomes for children and young people

Outcomes for children and young people are **good**.

Children thrive within placements that enrich their lives. Children state that they are 'more confident' and are 'listened to'. All children are happy, they describe their foster carers as 'really nice' 'welcoming', 'kind' and 'friendly'. Children highlight that foster carers 'make you feel at home' and they 'feel part of the family.' The only thing children would appreciate is information about their foster carers prior to the placement. Children benefit from generally stable placements. The fostering service uses a range of mechanisms to achieve permanency for children; these include long-term matching, family and friends (kinship) care and financial packages to assist with special guardianship orders. Children enjoy family life and are able to maintain meaningful contact with their relatives and friends. The organisation has its own contact centre, which is able to provide high quality supervision of contact. Foster carers sensitively and actively support contact arrangements as dictated by the child's care plan.

Children live with foster carers who are able to effectively meet their diverse needs. This includes their social, emotional, psychological and physical needs and those in relation to their ability, age, ethnicity, faith, gender, language, religious belief and sexual orientation. The vast majority of carers are of a White British background, which results in a significant number of transracial placements. Foster carers and social workers succeed in nurturing the individuality of each child that enables children to develop a positive self-view. The organisation offers an extensive range of support, which includes specific training, guidance in culturally competent caring, a 'social aunty' scheme, life story work and therapeutic intervention. The only discrimination children highlight is other people's perception of them being a looked after child. They feel that there is a lack of high profile positive role models who have been looked after children.

Children positively influence their own lives and service development through a variety of avenues. Almost all children share their views at their statutory views. They also routinely contribute to their foster carer's review process and foster carer training. The fostering service undertakes an annual participation survey where children comment on their respective placements. Children regularly meet with their own and supervising social workers. The organisation has commissioned an independent advocacy service which succeeds in enabling children to share their views regularly with senior management and the corporate parenting group. Children have their own youth council and a youth mayor. An area where children are making a difference within the fostering service is in relation to their involvement in the tendering process in the private, voluntary and independent sector. A care leaver is also a valued member of the fostering panel.

Children benefit from improved educational outcomes, particularly in relation to their educational attainment. School attendance is steadily increasing. There is a very good record of inclusion, resulting in no permanent exclusions for the past five years. A high number of young people leaving care go to university and are supported by the local authority. The organisation provides educational and training opportunities alongside apprenticeships. At a strategic level children's educational needs are being championed by the virtual head teacher. Funds are available to assist with extra tuition, purchasing books and extra-curricular activities. The latter is linked to a child's personal development and self-esteem. Specific support is also available to assist children for whom English is an additional language. Children receive good support from the looked after children's liaison officer. Individual educational and personal achievements are also recognised in an annual celebration event. A robust strategy is being implemented to tackle young people who are not in education, employment or training.

Children understand the importance of healthy lifestyles. The organisation provides appropriate support to promote their physical, psychological and emotional well-being. Children state they eat a healthy diet and undertake various forms of exercise. The organisation provides subsidised leisure cards and reduced entry into fun attractions. There is operational co-ordination and monitoring of children's health needs and more attention is being given to outcomes. Foster carers have first aid training and access to general and individualised training enabling them to meet

specific health needs. The organisation is currently trying to achieve healthy school status for their virtual school. Health passports are being developed. Health promotion programmes are also being extended. Children benefit from a specialist family centre and a wraparound Children and Adolescent Mental Service. There are numerous examples of these interventions contributing to planned transitions, stabilising placements and assisting in attachment issues. Children are able to pursue their interests, talents and hobbies. The fostering service arranges various events and activities. Children are able to engage in a variety of experiences that broaden their view of life; going to the theatre is a good example of this.

Strong 16 plus arrangements successfully prepare young people for adulthood. The extensive opportunities enable care leavers to have high aspirations. There are a wide range of different interventions to support them into further education, employment or training. The organisation has a dedicated team who ensure a smooth transition into adult life. Young people comment that this team 'really nurtured me. I feel blessed. They helped turn the negative into positive.' Young people particularly appreciate having a mentor and feel this aspect of the service should be further developed. Young people have a variety of options which include staying in their foster homes and moving into supportive living. The 'staying put' policy enables young people to stay in their foster placement post 18. Care leavers have a significant impact on policy; for example they influenced an increase in the financial benefits available to them. High quality pathway plans effectively address young people's needs with specific attention to their culture, identity and disability. The organisation acknowledges the importance of good mental health, resulting in the introduction of support services specifically for young people over the age of 16.

## Quality of service

The quality of the service is **good**.

Children benefit from a fostering service which has a strong commitment to providing a high quality care. One of the main objectives is 'to provide the best possible placements for children and young people to enable them to reach their full potential'. A large majority of children are able to stay within Southend through internal and private and voluntary placements. The fostering service has a range of skilled foster carers, who demonstrate great tenacity and initiative. Each foster carer's personal qualities, skills, training and support effectively equip them to meet the needs of children. The fostering service offers a range of placement options; these include the introduction of a specialist service for children who have complex or more challenging needs. This works well for children, as in the past they may have been placed in external placements. This new development is scheduled to be reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose. Disabled children benefit from a short-break service. The Marvellous Minds scheme assists with increasing the availability of short-break placements. This scheme is commendable and was shortlisted for a national award.

The service has good arrangements regarding the recruitment, assessment and support of foster carers. The recent appointment of a marketing and recruitment

officer demonstrates the service's determination to recruit a broad range of carers. There is an acknowledgment of the need to recruit carers from black and minority ethnic communities, carers for large sibling groups and those able to care for adolescents and disabled children.

The preparation and assessment of foster carers is governed by the underlying principle that the welfare of children is paramount. There is an efficient time frame for responding to enquires and for inviting prospective applicants to introductory training. There is a good training and development programme for foster carers. Foster carers are making active progress with their Children's Workforce Development Council training. Children receive care from foster carers who are well supported. There is a valued foster families council, regular news letters, coffee mornings, trips, events, regular structured supervisory visits and respite breaks.

Effective panel arrangements ensure all decision making is in the best interests of children. The panel has an independent highly experienced chair who brings significant knowledge and passion to their role. The central list for panel consists of a people with a variety of professional and personal experiences. They benefit from on-going training and annual performance appraisals. A key strength of the panel is their robust quality assurance function, which contributes to further improvements within the service. The panel is kept up-to-date on developments within social care which ensures competent decisions which incorporate best practice. They also regularly receive management information, which enables the fostering panel to have an overview of the service. The agency decision maker considers recommendations in a timely manner.

Comprehensive care planning clearly details children's needs. Foster carers highlight that all information is not consistently shared with them. The fostering service has a matching policy; however, there is a recognition that this could be further strengthened. Additional support is provided to enhance the stability of placements. Children's social workers are dynamic and very child focused. Their involvement is extremely beneficial in the planning stages of each placement. This enables a successful dialogue and sharing of information resulting in increasing placement stability. There is a strong respect for foster carers who were described as doing a 'fantastic' job, 'going over and beyond' and 'strongly advocating' for children. Foster carers have good working relationships with the fostering service, describing it as 'excellent'. Where disagreements arise management actively endeavour to work in partnership and achieve a positive resolution.

### **Safeguarding children and young people**

The service is **good** at keeping children and young people safe and feeling safe.

The fostering service demonstrates a strong commitment to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. Children confirm that they 'trust' their foster carers and 'feel safe and secure'. Children know how to complain, highlighting various individuals who they will share their concerns with. The independent advocacy service also ensures complaints and concerns are acted upon. This

advocacy service also has a specific remit to represent disabled children and provide an independent visitor service. Children do not report bullying as an issue. Very few children are regularly reported missing. Where this does occur the fostering service has a commendable awareness of the issues and of how to ensure a safe return. This includes a robust action plan involving close collaborative working with the Police. Children have their own 'staying safe' cards which provide them with useful telephone numbers including the emergency duty team and external agencies.

Foster carers have access to comprehensive training which encompasses the extensive aspects of safeguarding and the impact abuse has on children. This enables foster carers to better understand children and effectively manage behaviours they may display. Foster carers know the diverse forms of abuse and neglect and the expectations regarding keeping themselves and children safe. These include internal and external environmental risks and personal and internet safety. Foster carers receive support to develop their own safe care policy relevant to their family circumstances. Health and safety has a high agenda within the fostering service. Supervising social workers undertake at least one annual unannounced visit to fostering households. Standards of care and safety issues are continually monitored. The fostering service effectively manages allegations and where necessary take cases back to the fostering panel. The only shortfall was in relation to the lack of consistency regarding risk assessments. Foster carers do not routinely receive all the necessary documentation relating to a child; this results in them not being fully aware of the risks associated with caring for each child.

The organisation's recent Safeguarding and Looked after Children inspection described the effectiveness of services to ensure that children are safe and feel safe as 'outstanding'. The Local Authority designated Officer (LADO) is well established and highly successful in engaging with all partner agencies. The proactive Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) provides significantly strong leadership. The LSCB scrutiny panel is recognised as a model of good practice. Children receive protection from the organisation's recruitment system. The service does not employ new staff unless all the necessary checks have been received. This helps prevent unsuitable persons from working within the organisation. Clear and efficient monitoring processes ensure the systematic renewal of Criminal Records Bureau checks. Registration of qualified social workers with the Health and Care Professionals Council is also carefully monitored. The robust staff recruitment procedure values children's views. Children take a key role in sitting on interview panels and deciding on staff appointments.

## **Leadership and management**

The leadership and management of the local authority fostering agency are **good**.

Children benefit from a personalised, effective and well managed service. All levels of staff, corporate parenting board members and foster carers are passionately dedicated to their respective roles. Staff feel they 'work well as a team' and 'give 100%'. Leaders and managers are highly qualified and have substantial experience. Social workers actively promote the best interests of children. A significant strength



is the children's social workers valued contribution to identity work, which helps children develop a positive self-view. Foster carers are extremely skilled and proactively support each other. The service recognises this and having adopted the Foster Care Charter, they are now developing their own foster carer pledge. Foster carers are strong advocates for children and generally feel that they are treated professionally. They take pride in the importance of their role, sharing responsibility and efficiently engaging with other key professionals in the child's life. Effective and robust commissioning arrangements ensure that private, voluntary and independent sector placements are suitably vetted and performance managed to ensure that children placed have a high quality experience.

The fostering service is undergoing a period of change, due to new management, new systems, and moving offices. The co-location with other social work teams provides good continuity of care and better outcomes for children. This promotes easier face-to-face dialogue ensuring the needs of children are at the centre of decision making. The fostering service has a comprehensive Statement of Purpose which is updated and clearly highlights their aims and objectives. There is a great respect for children and a wish to create a supportive and enabling environment for them. Children benefit from their own age appropriate guide. This summarises the service and the main procedures. It also provides a good selection of information about local resources and national agencies which can assist them. Children take the time to compliment the service. Recent cards thanked the fostering team for their Christmas party.

Children benefit from a fostering team who have a good understanding of their needs. The fostering service successfully employs and retains competently experienced and qualified staff. The organisation demonstrates a firm commitment to professional development. There is a comprehensive staff training programme and staff are able to undertake specialist training; for example, the Fostering Changes Programme. A structured induction effectively prepares staff for their role. There is a strong emphasis on learning and keeping up to date with new legislation, research and practice developments. This is appropriately shared with staff to improve the quality of the service. An example of this is the further development of the missing children procedures to incorporate learning from the Rochdale serious case review. Foster carers have the necessary qualities to meet children's complex needs. Their nationally recognised vocational training is in progress. The provision of additional courses, workshops and e-learning opportunities further enhances their competency.

Southend won council of the year in 2012 and departments within the council work extremely well together. The council demonstrates good financial management and has reduced its budget while maintaining front line services. Senior management consistently communicate high expectations to staff about sustaining improvement. There is a focus on strategic development which is committed to enhancing children's lives. The fostering service demonstrates a good capacity for continuing improvement. This is based on its track record and performance since the previous inspection.

The service has addressed the three recommendations from the last inspection. Two

of these were in relation to foster carers' professional and health related training. The third was regarding helping foster carers support and encourage each child to deal with all forms of discrimination. Appropriate training and guidance is available for foster carers. Leaders and managers routinely and rigorously monitor and evaluate the quality of assessments, care, guidance and support provided. This leads to significant improvements in service provision. Service audits and quality reports are founded on robust evidence tackling key areas requiring further development and building on areas of strength.

## About this inspection

The purpose of this inspection is to assure children and young people, parents, the public, local authorities and government of the quality and standard of the service provided. The inspection was carried out under the Care Standards Act 2000 to assess the effectiveness of the service and to consider how well it complies with the relevant regulations and meets the national minimum standards.

The report details the main strengths, any areas for improvement, including any breaches of regulation, and any failure to meet national minimum standards. The judgements included in the report are made against the inspection framework and the evaluation schedule for local authority fostering agencies.